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# Building Communities as a Necessary Tool for Sustainability

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Building Communities as a Necessary Tool for Sustainability

China G. Ageros

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Outline

Part I ~ Preamble ~ p. 3

A. Guiding principles and values ~ p. 5

B. Educational and leadership philosophy ~ p. 6

C. Reflection on LSE key learning areas

1. Self understanding and commitment ~ p. 7

2. Systemic view of the world ~ p. 8

3. Bio-cultural relationships ~ p. 10

4. Tools for sustainable change ~ p. 11

Part II ~ Academic synthesis

D. Introduction ~ p. 13

5. Problem statement ~ p. 16

E. Literature review

6. Some of our complex problems ~ p. 17

F. Solution

7. Community Participation and Ownership ~ p. 22

8. Gandhi ~ p. 25

9. Voluntary Simplicity ~ p. 27

10. Small Local Economies ~ p. 29

G. Conclusion ~ p. 31

References ~ p. 32

Appendix I ~ p. 35

“We bear witness not just with our intellectual work but with ourselves, our lives. Surely the crisis of these times demands that we give our all. Remember the song which asked ‘Is your altar of sacrifice late?’ To me, this ‘all’ includes our habits of being, the way we live. It is both political practice and spiritual sacrament, a life of resistance. How can we speak of change, of hope, and love if we court death? All of the work we do, no matter how brilliant or revolutionary in thought or action, loses power and meaning if we lack integrity of being” (hooks, 2003, p. 164).

### *Part I: Preamble*

When you move from country to country every three or four years, like I did growing up, one might think that community is hard to come by, but the opposite is true in the ex-pat world. Due to our (expatriate’s) separation from ‘home’ - which could be anywhere in the world, and our apparent difference from the culture we were living in, we bonded. Our third culture status was rarely even discussed, we were where we were for an abbreviated time so we had to get to know each other - and fast. When I left ex-pat life to come to the States for university I had a similar experience. I chose a small school with a large percentage of international students, and combined with them and all those ‘Yankees’ who had never been away from home before, we created our own, new, short lived communities in short order.

After graduation, Bachelors in hand, it was a different story. Friends scattered home or to the big cities and I flailed. Massively. The world was too big, there were too many options, I didn’t have a clue about where to go or what to do; I was alone and without community to lean

on. So, I made some excuses and scurried home to my family who were living in Thailand at the time - Thailand being the closest to 'home' I had ever experienced - and I flailed some more. A year later via luck or fate, and after several false starts, I ended up housesitting in Portland for the summer. That was 18 years ago. And the sad thing is, despite having an amazing family and many wonderful friends here and all over, all these years later I still don't feel like I have a real community in this town - yet.

In all fairness, I've left Portland twice since moving here, both for three and a half year stretches, to other Pacific North-West locals, and in both of those places I did find community. First there was Breitenbush, an amazing place on so many levels (that I won't get into here), where I met my husband and many friends-for-life. I loved living in an intentional community in the middle of the National Forest. I learned so much about myself, about living in community and about a sense of place. Breitenbush helped form my identity and will always be a piece of who I am.

Then, after a few years back in Portland, my new little family and I moved to truly beautiful Orcas Island. Having a small year-round population and being isolated in the way only islands can, finding community on Orcas was not too challenging. You meet an interesting person on the ferry, they invite you to a gathering, and things slowly but surely expand from there. The community wasn't as neatly condensed as Breitenbush, it took more intention and time to build, but somehow the watery borders that isolated us from the mainland drew us together during the long quiet winters.

In the mean time, after a life time of living overseas, my parents moved to Portland and for grandparent's-sake we were compelled to move back here as well. It's been over seven years

now, on this leg of our journey, and I still feel fairly lost when it comes to a local community. I blame all the reasons that we know are at fault for the general lack of community in American lives i.e. - the nuclear family, single family homes, car culture, individualism, TV, commercialism, consumerism, fear, intolerance - I could go on and on. Despite all the reasons I just mentioned, there are people who feel they have community, and there are ways of finding community if you persevere, but it is not the pervasive lifestyle for most of us. For more than just my own self, and for the sake of sustainability, I wish having community was the norm.

### *Guiding principles and values*

I feel very fortunate that I found the Leadership for Sustainability Education (LSE) program at Portland State University (PSU), and even more fortunate that it exists in the same town that I live in. I didn't know what sustainability education meant exactly, but I knew I wanted to find out and make it my own. I have long been an environmentalist, meaning that I care deeply about our mother-earth and all her inhabitants - plant or animal, and act daily in ways that I have learned help lessen my impact on the environment. I've been a feminist even longer and now know, that for me, feminism and environmentalism are inextricable and go hand in hand. For me, feminism is knowing that men and women should be treated equally in every way, as well as a complete rejection of patriarchy and its principles, one of which is seeing the world as a resource to be exploited for personal gain. My other values are love, kindness, gratitude, respect and being open to ideas and experiences that may come along. Put together quite simply, my values are sustainability and sustainability is justice.

Hawken (2007), states a similar view, “Social justice and attending to the planet proceed in parallel; the abuse of one entails the exploitation of the other” (p. 22), and, “Every single particle, thought, and being, even our dreaming, is the environment, and what we do to one another is reflected on earth just as surely as what we do to the earth is reflected in our diseases and discontents” (p. 23). Everything is connected, it is not possible to escape that truth.

### *Education and leadership philosophy*

We are all leaders. We all have knowledge and skills particular to ourselves. Whether in formal or informal educational settings, through participation and capacity building, if we share our experiences and contribute our abilities to one another for the good of the whole, we can continue the shift toward sustainability education that is necessary for the next seven generations to survive the impact of what we have done to this planet.

“Over these years, I came to see that the early assumption, shared by most people in environmental education, was a simplistic and deterministic one: that if people learnt about environmental issues, their behavior would change. Not only does it not work, but too much environmental knowledge (particularly relating to the various global crises) can be disempowering, without a deeper and broader learning process taking place” (Sterling, 2001, p. 18-19).

Leadership is not about standing up in front of others informing them of what is important and what needs to be done. Good leaders and educators empower other people to inform themselves and decide on their own how to proceed to their own desired outcome. In *The Tao of Leadership*, Lao Tzu (1986), says a good midwife is present and assists, but when the

baby is born the mother feels like she did it all on her own. Good leaders encourage everyone to take a leadership role and this does not threaten them, they know when to step up and when to step back, getting the credit is not important.

As educators that utilize the above leadership style we have to be patient and kind, knowing when to reach in and help an individual or group and knowing when to let them figure out their problems on their own, its important to the growth of all involved. As educators we do not have all the answers. We don't know everything there is to know. Our students may have a completely different learning style from ourselves. Our job is to present them with opportunities to learn in the way that best works for them and then get out of their way.

### *Reflection on LSE key learning areas*

#### *Self understanding and commitment*

Throughout my courses in LSE my favorite assignments to work on were the reflection papers. Short and sweet and full of promise, they helped me to get clarity around my own purpose in both my LSE course work and my personal development. Regrets are a waste of time, but examining my past choices, both 'good' and 'bad' and reflecting on how those choices brought me to where I am now, can be helpful in deciding how to move forward with grace and a sure step. Fukuoka (1978), said, "Nature can never be understood or improved upon by human effort" (p. 184). It may be a good idea to take that advice to heart when trying to understand your self as well. *We are nature*. Reflection can be very good, as described above, but humans think too much and for the most part have forgotten how to trust their instincts and just *be* in the world. It's possible that without community we feel there is too much at stake to trust ourselves fully.



We don't always have the support in the outside world that we have in LSE that allows us to 'trust the process.' There's often no buffer against harsh realities if something goes wrong, and so we try to think our way to safety and away from chance and the potential of magic.

Participating in the world around us is so important, for making connections, building relationships, showing who we are and seeing ourselves mirrored back to us. Acting on our intuition and reflecting on our actions - putting ourselves out there for the world to see and showing who we are, to others and ourselves, this is how we learn to understand ourselves and what we may have to offer the world. Participation is how we commit to our ideals, and hopefully figure out what we want to do with our lives.

### *Systemic view of the world*

“A Sustainability leader understands that everything is connected to everything else, that we live in a dynamic, ever-changing universe, and that no single action occurs in isolation but is inextricably linked, often invisibly, to every other action” (Ferdig, 2007, p. 32).

Every one of us, everything around us and on this planet is made from the dust of the stars. We are connected, we are the same, we are one. We may not always feel the connection, the tugging on the web, but it is there. We need each other and the other lives around us for everything that keeps us alive and makes life worth living.

Our incessant compartmentalization of all things insists on separation, but that's not how systems work, everything on this planet is part of a system. Each new life, each financial

transaction, each rain storm is part of a pattern, a continuum, a whole. It's impossible for events to exist alone, independent of their surroundings, complete in and of themselves. Sterling (2001), says:

“we often fail to see connections and patterns ... an ecological view of the world emphasizes *relationship*. Such thinking is systemic rather than linear, integrative rather than fragmentary, it is more concerned with process than things, with dynamics than linear cause-effect, with pattern rather than detail. It is both descriptive and purposeful, being concerned with both recognizing and realizing wholeness” (p. 16-17, emphasis in original).

When we truly feel connected to the people around us, we feel calm, peaceful and grounded.

Being part of a community is all about relationships and thinking about the good of the whole instead of just the self. We implement systems for communication and decision making that are equitable and inclusive, and the patterns that are created vary over time because they are dynamic, not rigid. Think of all that would be conserved if communities shared their resources of all kinds. Think of all that could be accomplished if communities worked to build their needs and desires together. There's the expression 'Many hands make light work.' But when people come together to create something, it becomes more than the many hands that made it; when its completed its better than if any one person toiled over the project alone. What's important is the *energy*, the event, the fun that happened along the way, the camaraderie and the relationships that were strengthened in the process that make the work seem not like work, but more valuable.

*Bio-cultural relationships*

Learning to work in a group or a community is tricky and messy and there is often room for misunderstanding and conflict. There is the worry that not everyone will do their fair share or that people won't agree on what to do, how to do it, when and where to get together to work, and so on. Good communication and listening skills are needed by all, and special attention must be paid to power and privilege among the group members. Despite all of its challenges, learning to work in a group is so important because it is the best way to build sustainable communities and affect the change we need.

On a very small scale for example, if you know your neighbor, really know her - her name, who her family is, her life story and how she got to be your neighbor - you would be incredibly ashamed and embarrassed if she caught you dumping your toxic chemicals in the neighborhood's water source. In fact, you probably wouldn't dump those chemicals in the first place, you'd figure out how to dispose of them through the proper channels, expanding your network and creating new connections in the process. In comparison to if you didn't know your neighbor at all, you might not care what she thinks or what the consequences to her and her family would be, you may only care that you got caught and that you will be punished.

Expand this scenario to where you are a small business and your neighbor is a neighborhood. Businesses, even big corporations are made up of *people*, they can't exist without people to run them, and those people and the people who live in the neighborhood could get to know each other and that simple act would make it much harder for the business to decide to harm the neighborhood by polluting their water source.

Orr (2011), says “The ecological emergency is about the failure to comprehend our citizenship in the biotic community” (p. 235). We mustn’t forget the non-humans in our bio-cultural community. Humans can be pretty self-centered and think only of the impact of their actions on other humans. All of the plant and other animal life in the water source example above would be affected in one way or another by the relationships of the humans and how they choose to behave. Unfortunately there is not a lot they can do about it, we wield a lot of power and we must be the ones to keep them safe by keeping the entire biological environment around us in our minds and in our hearts.

### *Tools for sustainable change*

What if we could create a world full of sustainable communities who know and cooperate with the communities around them until all the communities are connected like a huge global web? Each community consists of diverse individuals who collaborate with one another to create an ecologically and socially unique, sustainable and self-sufficient whole, grounded in their own specific place. People’s main pursuit would be to create and maintain relationships, through which they would get their basic needs met. Homes and clothing would be simple and utilitarian but beautiful, with an emphasis on craftsmanship, quality and local, renewable materials, using eco-design and biomimicry.

Education in these communities would be a life-long endeavor and anyone with skills to share could be educators. ‘School’ would be participatory, experiential, done in small groups and again, focused around relationships, volunteerism and service to the community - both the

human community and the ecological community of the area. Sociocracy and environmental governance could be used to organize and manage community needs and conflicts.

If we could really create a global network of sustainable communities it would be possible to fix the ills our planet currently suffers. Injustices of all kinds would be eliminated through relationship, caring and kindness. Peace is possible.

The tools we need in order to create peace are many, yet simple and interconnected. They include active listening, building relationships and participating in the good and the joyful around you. Being aware of our power and privilege and valuing diversity in all its forms will go a long way toward empowering more people with skills and gifts to share. Developing educational models that are experiential and dynamic and allow kids, and adults, to express their creativity. Taking good care of oneself is so important: deep breathes, taking the time to do things that feel good to you and are good for you, spending time outdoors, eating healthy food, exercising and stretching, spending time with loved ones, family and friends, connecting to the source of your happiness and positive energy - honoring your mind, body, and spirit as one.

*Part II: Academic Synthesis*

*“Sustainability is another word for justice, for what is just is sustainable and what is unjust is not.”*

*~Dr. Matthew Fox*

*Introduction*

What *is* community? It means different things to different people, but generally it means a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. Substitute ‘people’ for other animals or plants and you get the same idea. Sometimes people are considered a community because, from the outside, they look the same, go to the same school, speak the same language or live in the same part of town. Sometimes folks are considered to be a community because they are perceived to have the same needs - whether they do or not.

Using the term community so loosely can be troublesome because of the actual diversity that exists within the group of people being referred to. It can also be misrepresentative or create assumptions about the actual relationships that exist within the group - lumping unrelated and unacquainted folks together. However, there is power in numbers, and community is a word that can empower and bring people together. If the diversity within communities can be acknowledged, appreciated and supported, there can be political heft which may be beneficial.

When I think of community I think of family and friends who are not necessarily geographically close, though that would be nice - ideal even, but who are emotionally close, with a web-like system of mutually beneficial connections. In my ideal community the depth of the relationships between the community members varies and changes over time, but each adult and

child feels connected, known and respected as their own individual, unique and diverse self. Deep down we are wired to be part of a close-knit clan, dependent on each other for our very survival. Obviously a lot has changed in the roughly ten thousand years since humans developed agriculture, but in terms of our evolution -that only represents five percent of our history as a species (Ryan & Jetha, 2010). We still crave what most of us no longer have, a real community.

Though seemingly no longer entirely necessary, and possibly not even consciously felt as lacking on a personal level, we ARE suffering from the loss of community in our lives. Without the entity that at once both supported and held us accountable we now live in a world that contains private jets with gold-plated seat belts and starving children. And although most would agree that starving children are desperately tragic, many people would rather put their efforts toward getting their own private jet than helping the millions of chronically impoverished - despite the fact that if evenly distributed there *is* enough to go around. If managed responsibly and carefully and without waste, excess and greed, our precious one-and-only planet will provide for us all (Capra, 2002).

A cursory look at the news will reveal a planet whose ecology and society are in deep trouble: there are random mass stabbings in public places in China; hundreds of Nigerian girls have been kidnapped to be sold in the market; Russia is trying to forcibly take over one of its neighboring countries; climate change is responsible for bigger and more powerful storms all over the world causing ecological disasters and thousands of human deaths each year; according to a report by the U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee (2010), the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer; US soldiers are coming home from the conflicts in the Middle East only to commit suicide in record numbers; according to UNICEF (2014), 768 million

people don't have access to clean water and basic sanitation which kills thousands of children weekly. In the North or the West or the Developed or First World, we sip our \$5 lattes and read the New York Times on our iPads and tsk because we broke a nail or stubbed a toe.

Our global problems are complex, vast and interrelated. They are not going away, instead they continue to expand and worsen. What can we *do*? The problems are so overwhelming they seem impossible to manage. How can we, as individuals, make steps in the direction of overcoming what seems insurmountable? Many people would be happy if they could simply manage not to contribute to the problems, but even that is extremely difficult to do. When you examine solutions carefully you find there are problems there too. The lesser of two evils is hard to get excited about. We're on this seemingly endless downward spiral and we've cleverly set up the ride in such a way that there is no way to escape.

Globalization has polluted our water and our air, it has undermined work forces and trashed communities (Hawken, 2007). Corporations have taken over our economies to the extent that we don't know from which far off region our food and clothing have come from. When you can buy things cheaper from Target than the local market or dress shop, the small, independent entrepreneur has no chance to compete.

Even education, the potential solution, is full of pitfalls and problems of its own. The western educational system, which has been exported to much of the world, was built to enable a migration of labor from farms to factories and has not adapted much since the industrial revolution. Even the 'best' schools, crowned by invasive ivy, have produced class after class of the people who have become our leaders in public policy, economics, science and business - to name a few - and who have used their top educations to get us into the dire mess we are currently



suffering through. “We are educated by and large to ‘compete and consume’ rather than to ‘care and conserve’” (Sterling, 2001, p. 21). Clearly we can’t look to traditional education the way it is commonly structured today.

All things sustainable is the answer, in particular sustainable community development. If the members of our societies grew up in unique, nurturing and thriving sustainable communities, being educated holistically with the sustainability and interconnectedness of all things in mind, think what a different world we could have. The solutions are grassroots, slow and process oriented. They are not about money or financing, they are about relationships, service, systems and place. Our solutions will not be about coming up with a plan and sticking to it, they’ll be about honoring diversity, participation and reflection.

OUR LACK OF COMMUNITY IS AT THE ROOT OF OUR COMPLEX PROBLEMS;  
SUSTAINABILITY, AND THEREFORE JUSTICE, WILL NOT MANIFEST UNLESS WE  
WORK TO BUILD COMMUNITIES THAT CAN CREATE THE SOLUTIONS THEY NEED.

*Literature review**Some of our complex problems*

The evolution of human beings and the way we interact with each other and the world around us is a fascinating subject. The many cultures that have come about around the globe in some ways could not be more different. The food we eat, the languages we speak, the way we treat children, the elderly, women and people with sexual orientations that are not heterosexual; our values, attitudes and beliefs vary considerably. What does not vary is our need for each other and for connection (Capra, 2002). We need love (Orr, 2011). Sure, there are some folks out there who just want to be left alone, but they are the exception to the rule that humans are social beings. For most of us, if we look deep into our hearts, we know that life is worth living only for the connections we make.

The complex problems that we as a global community face are many as well as grim. They can be loosely categorized as social or environmental, but they are closely intertwined and totally inseparable. Ultimately these problems boil down to greed and the lack of community to hold the greedy accountable.

As mentioned in the Introduction above, the education system has played its part by mis-educating our leaders and by continuing and deepening the destructive patterns in our schools, business and governments. A complete overhaul of education is needed. We can't keep doing the same things and expect different outcomes (Sterling, 2001). One of the more obvious disconnects is between children and their natural environment. So many children don't spend time with, and therefore don't connect with, the plants and animals that live in their part of the world. Kids need to connect with their place so that they can know why they should care about it. Sterling (2001),

makes this point: “Without an ecological understanding, we are in real danger of creating post-modern learning institutions, whose graduates are able to exploit others and the environment more efficiently and effectively than their predecessors” (p. 45). That is a scary thought. A more positive model would be a school that fosters community, simplicity, spirituality, participation, positive relationships, etc. and an administration that maintains the grounds and purchases supplies with ethical practices in mind (Sterling, 2001).

Our food systems are another major problem in dire need of total renovation. We live in a world of extremes: 20-30 million people are malnourished (Capra, 2002), and on the other end of the spectrum - obesity. Both groups are malnourished, the first because they don't have access to enough food, the second because the food they eat is overly processed and devoid of nutrition. Though over-population is an issue and is a stress on our natural resources, it is a myth that there is not enough food to go around. Capra (2002), says:

“A 1997 study found that in the developing world, 78 percent of all malnourished children under five live in countries with food surpluses. Many of these countries, in which hunger is rampant, export more agricultural goods than they import. ... People go hungry because the means to produce and distribute food are controlled by the rich and powerful: world hunger is not a technical but a political problem” (p. 189).

Profit is clearly much more important than people in a capitalist system.

Another complex problem at the top of the list of destructive culprits is consumerism. Fueled by greed, capitalism, commercialization, globalization, specialization, clever advertising and poor design, consumerism and our throw-away culture have twisted us up so much that we

think that going shopping will help make a bad situation better. Buy organic, buy ‘green’, buy environmentally responsible products, buy a hybrid or electric car, buy fair-trade-wild-crafted-farm-fresh at your local co-op even, as long as you buy, buy, buy! We are more readily defined by what we consume than by our character or our actions. And the things we buy are built to break so that we’ll have to buy them again. David Orr writes so beautifully about the ridiculous excesses of American culture. All the little must-have doodads, the useless technology we covet and the brands we show off to impress our friends. Orr (2011), writes:

“An economy so dependent on ephemeralities is a fraud because it cannot satisfy the desires that it arouses. It is a lie because it purports to solve by trivial consumption what can only be solved by better human relations. It is immoral because it takes scarce resources from those who still lack the basics and gives them to those with everything who are merely bored. It is unsustainable because it creates waste that destroys climatic stability and ecosystems. It is unintelligent because it redirects the mental energies of producers and consumers alike to illusion, not reality, which makes us stupid. And because of such things an economy organized to promote fantasy will eventually collapse of its own weight” (p. 122).

The last of our complex problems that I will address is fear, how fear of the unknown and ignorance seriously and negatively impact people all over the world in the forms of racism, sexism, ethnic conflicts, homophobia, caste based discrimination, religious persecution and so on. We cannot help who our parents are, our “identities are ascribed to us at birth through no effort or decision or choice of our own; there is, therefore, no reason to blame each other or hold

each other responsible for the identities we have...[it] is outside our control” (Harro, 2000, p. 16). Why then do we continuously treat people who are different from ourselves with such prejudice and discrimination? We’re scared, ignorant and inexperienced.

From space Earth looks as smooth as a marble; from a distance all the various types of humans have similar silhouettes. Up close the differences are there, but they are superficial compared to their similarities. People with a desire to pit one group against another do so in order to remain on top and distract from their own greediness. Its called ‘divide and conquer’ and it works really well because everyone is so busy being righteous that they don’t band together to resist the real oppressor. “Hegemony is a system characterized by domination and oppression within which the oppressed assume the values and worldview of their oppressors and, thereby, engage in their own oppression” (Evans, 2010, p. 5). One example of oppression comes from hooks (1981), who says, “While black women participated equally with black men in the struggle for survival ... they did not advocate an end to sexism. Twentieth century black women had learned to accept sexism as natural, a given, a fact of life” (p. 4). This means that they identified themselves as only black, not as black women. Another example of this is the women’s movement here in the States. Instead of black women and white women working together to fight sexism, they let the patriarchy divide them along racial lines, to the benefit of men everywhere.

There is no way to quantify the amount of pain and suffering caused by the powerful and privileged of our world. The physical, psychological and emotional damage that has been done to individuals and whole groups of people is staggering. This altogether patriarchal system of oppression is also to blame for the destruction we see to the earth as well as to her inhabitants.

Hawken (2007), argues, “No culture has ever honored its environment but disgraced its people, and conversely, no government can say it cares for its citizens while allowing the environment to be trashed” (p. 145). We’re the only species that poisons our own habitat. Not even the wealthiest people will be able to avoid getting physically ill from the pollutants in our air and water. Twenty four years ago Orr (1990), warned we’re losing an acre per second of rainforest and up to 250 species per day are going extinct (p.237). The powerful and privileged are spreading their pain and suffering indiscriminately - to not only other people, but every plant and animal alive.

What’s been done cannot be undone, but we can develop solutions and begin to work toward a future that is much less oppressive and bleak. One of the solutions is to create communities that can work together to come up with solutions to our complex problems. We need to work together and respect each other.

*Solution*

“We must build authentic and vibrant communities that sustain us ecologically and spiritually. For this challenge we need a generation equipped to respond with energy, moral stamina, enthusiasm, and ecological competence. This requires a new understanding of ourselves and our place in nature and in time” (Orr in Sterling, 2001, p. 8-9).

Part of the solution to our complex global problems - some of which are addressed above, is to build sustainable communities that will create the solutions that they need for themselves. Some of the ways to create a sustainable community are discussed below.

*Community Participation and Ownership*

Its not enough to identify a particular ‘community’ and come at it with organizers full of project ideas, facilitators with skills to make the projects happen and some amount of money to back it all up. That scenario has happened the world over countless times. The community has to feel a real sense of ownership of the project for it to be successful and continue on once the organizers and money move to the next community and the next project. Otherwise the only thing that has really been accomplished is the organizers and money donors get to *feel* like they did good work. Its a waste of time, money and energy!

People and organizations who work in the field of community development, whether in ‘developed’ or ‘developing’ countries, all face the problem of ownership and the longterm success of their projects. By and large, the folks engaged in this work are altruistic and really do

want what they think is best and to be helpful for those in need. The tricky thing is, what these good people think is helpful and beneficial is often not what the community itself wants or needs. Often times the project can be culturally or ecologically inappropriate. So, when the project is completed and the organizers move on to their next project, what they leave behind either ceases completely and immediately or slowly peters out over time. The desire and passion for the project leaves when the organizers do (Adely, 2004).

Ownership is key when creating community. Wheatley (1999), describes the importance of ownership in the work place as: “the emotional investment of employees in their work. Ownership describes personal connections to the organization, the powerful emotions of belonging that inspire people to contribute. People support what they create” (p. 68). In other words, people need to feel connected and that they are part of the process. Even if someone encourages you to help with their ‘great’ idea, you may not think it is so great because you were not part of the process in coming up with the idea and so you have no relationship with it - you don’t feel a sense of ownership. This same sense of ownership is needed in community building in order for the members to feel they are important to the whole.

Fletcher, Rousell, Worrell, McLean and Baydala (2012), assert, “Successful, sustainable initiatives in communities are community-based, community-paced, and community-led. In addition, the unique culture of each community is a protective factor, contributing to that community’s physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional health” (p. 99). Sterling (2001), agrees, “If we want people to have the capacity and will to contribute to civil society, then they have to feel *ownership* of their learning - it has to be meaningful, engaging and participative, rather than functional, passive and prescriptive” (p. 27, emphasis in original).



Ownership is vital, and the way to engender ownership is through participation and relationships. The solution is simple and clear, though incredibly complex and time consuming. Building relationships with the members of the community you want to create or assist takes time. You need to observe and listen and ask sincerely: 'What is it that *you* want? What does your community need?' Asking these questions in a culture outside of your own complicates matters significantly and in ways you may never understand. Building a rapport and trust requires being present and available. Wheatley (1999), notes:

“We live in a universe where relationships are primary. Nothing happens in the quantum world without something encountering something else. Nothing exists independent of its relationships. ... This is a world of process, the process of connecting, where ‘things’ come into temporary existence because of relationship” (p. 69).

The people in a community are the people who will know what assets the community owns and what its needs are. Coming into the community with your outside perspective and assuming that you know what other people need is absurd. If you truly want to help, it is a process. You need to ask, listen and let them take the lead in order for the community to take ownership of the project.

“The people at the table have to be the people who are effected by it” (L. Studler, personal communication, April 10, 2014). All too often people with power will discuss communities, or a project, a situation or issue in a community, without anyone from said community present at the discussion. People like Fida Adely, who work in the field of community development know that participation is essential to the success of these projects. Adely (2004), states:

“[participation] is about a whole process, about building a relationship with a community because of a philosophy or attitude that prioritizes local knowledge and know-how. Thus, the community is involved in identifying needs, prioritizing them, and thinking through solutions; they are full participants in an integrated development process” (p. 68-69).

In order to successfully build community, the people involved need to participate in the process and feel a real sense of ownership. Empowering communities to participate in their own creation, evolution and problem solving will greatly improve the odds that their solutions will be sustainable.

### *Gandhi*

Mahatma Gandhi was best known for his philosophy of non-violence but he was also a prolific writer with a vast body of work, including writings on education, craft, agriculture, the economy, and cultural domination, all with the aim of social justice. Kumar (1996), notes,

“The greater part of Gandhi’s work was to renew India’s vitality and regenerate its culture. Gandhi was not interested simply in exchanging rule by white sahibs for rule by brown sahibs; he wanted the government to surrender much of its power to local villages” (p. 418).

Gandhiji was the original touter of local economies! Gandhi’s principle of *swadeshi*, which when translated means ‘home economy’ or more loosely ‘local self-sufficiency’ (Kumar, 1996), was a clear outline of how villages could work to be self-sustaining.

“Gandhi’s vision of a free India was not of a nation-state but a confederation of self-governing, self-reliant, self-employed people living in village communities, deriving their right livelihood from the products of their homesteads. Maximum economic and political power - including the power to decide what could be imported into or exported from the village - would remain in the hands of the village assemblies. ... Gandhi’s dream was not of personal self-sufficiency, not even family self-sufficiency, but the self-sufficiency of the village community” (Kumar, 1996, p. 419).

Gandhi believed this was the only way for the hundreds of unique Indian cultures to continue to exist while at the same time empowering the people to take pride in working with their hands and also eliminating unemployment.

Gandhi also saw *swadeshi* as a tool for peace and spiritual development. “The seeds of war are sown with economic greed. ... Those who do not know when enough is enough will never have enough, but those who know when enough is enough already have enough. ... *Swadeshi* is the way to comprehensive peace: peace with oneself, peace between peoples, and peace with nature” (Kumar, 1996, p. 421). It is my sense that Gandhi understood on a deeply intuitive level that living simply, working with your hands and living in close cooperation with the land and your neighbors was the way to finding inner peace as well as global peace. Indians had lived this way for thousands of years, and he felt there should be a way to resist all of the outside influences that continued to manipulate the day to day life of the Indian villager; the villagers who had enough and knew when enough was enough.

Gandhi didn't use the word sustainability in his work, though I feel sure that if he were alive today that he would be a champion of sustainability in all its forms. Albeit using different words, he knew that sustainability is the same as justice. His main concerns were with the physical, spiritual and economic health of the people and the land - as they are inextricably connected. He expressed over and over, in one writing after another, his desire for justice and peace for all, and sustainability is the practice toward that end.

Williams (2001), explains how Gandhi thought of relationships as interdependent:

“Because humans are not bearers of properties but rather embodiments of relationships, each whole might be self-contained but not self-sufficient. Locating humanity in a complex web of relationships, Gandhi argues that the cosmos is not pyramidal but instead it is an ever-widening series of circles” (p. 9).

In thinking about building the sustainable communities of now, we can learn a lot by studying Gandhiji's writing and applying his ideas to our work. His wisdom can be a guide for sustainable communities that want to know themselves better in order to create holistic solutions to the problems they face.

### *Voluntary Simplicity*

One means to end exploitation and destruction is to turn our back on capitalism and the greed it engenders by turning toward and embracing voluntary simplicity and the simple and elegant concept of trusteeship as a way of life.

“Trusteeship ... is an artistic combination of great comfort and great simplicity: using minimum means to achieve maximum joy, without ever hurting nature. ...

The lesson ... is that beauty and nobility are to be found not in having more but in having just what is necessary” (Eswaran, 1990, p. 32).

Think about all the things you have; all the little tools and gadgets, clothes and toiletries, toys and knick-knacks, electronics, books and magazines, music, movies and other media, pots, pans and plates, dishes and utensils, your bike, your car, your phone, your appliances big and small, linens, drapes, shoes, candles, pets, and on and on. Many of us probably couldn't even list all the things we own. People have so many things they don't need or want that they put them out on the street hoping someone will come by and take them away. Not only do we have all these things, but we have to take care of them all. Our things make demands on our time. We have to clean them and repair them and maintain them. We have to carefully wrap them and box them up and haul them so that they can move with us to our new home. There is the energy and stress and resources we spend on our things beyond the initial purchase. The loss we feel when something is broken, the ache and regret when a loved thing is lost. Its pathological.

“But isn't it a little vulgar to pile up material possessions as an indication of our own worth when more than half the world lives in aching need - and when the very production of those things often harms the environment for our own children” (Eswaran, 1990, p. 32)?

Imagine the relief stepping away from all our things would grant us. The time and mental space we would regain, and of course the global resources that would be saved for slower, more sustainable use, at a more natural, renewable pace. If we can shift our thinking away from ownership and toward trusteeship, we'll be taking one important step toward happiness, peace and community. Think how joyful a slower, lighter, relationship-rich life would be. We would

not be able to deny that shifting our worth from a life of consumption to a life of simplicity and trusteeship would be transformational.

“Gandhi talked about the notion of *trusteeship*: We are not really owners of anything. Nature doesn’t work with ownership. We are guardians or trustees, stewarding resources that are part of a commons of human beings and life on the planet. We don’t have a right to hoard things - or to mindlessly throw them away” (M. Jat as quoted in Wheatley & Frieze, 2011, p. 151, emphasis in original).

‘A commons of human beings and life on the planet.’ Yes, that is what we are, now we need to act like it.

### *Small Local Economies*

Kumar (2002), talks about small, local economies and their relationships to healthy communities:

“Locally based economies ... enhance community spirit, community relationships, and community well-being. Such economies encourage mutual aid. Members of the village community take care of themselves, their families, their neighbors, their animals, lands and forests, and all the other natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations” (p. 155).

There can be no doubt that if people know each other and care about each other, and are connected to their shared place, that they will care *for* each other and *for* their shared space.

In Wendell Berry’s ‘17 Rules for Sustainable Communities’ (see Appendix I, p. 35), he is also talking about a small, rural, locally based economy, and how that economy greatly benefits

the community that supports it. The idea is that if you follow the '17 Rules' you'll be building a sustainable community at the same time as building a thriving local economy, and everyone, including the local, non-human biological community, benefits. Local communities focus on the members within the community and on how their relationships can be mutually beneficial.

While all of Berry's 17 Rules for Sustainable Communities are important, my favorite rule is number 15: 'Always be aware of the economic value of neighborly acts. In our time, the costs of living are greatly increased by the loss of neighborhood, which leaves people to face their calamities alone.' Without community we face so much hardship on our own. Our busy days are so busy because we have so little support.

When attempting to localize an economy the first thing many people think about is food. Some of the staples that we have become accustomed to eating on a daily basis are foods that are not or can not be grown where you live. However, food and energy are the two most important and basic commodities that communities rely on. Hawken (2007), writes, "localization creates food webs that produce fresher, higher quality food, and provides food security, because it lessens dependence on distant sources" (p. 157). That in turn lessens the impact on the earth's resources in multiple ways: eliminating packaging and shipping which both in turn lessen energy use. It's great that your food will taste better, but in this increasingly unstable world 'food stability' sound like a potential life saver.

*Conclusion*

From ten thousand years ago back to the beginning of human existence, people lived in small communities of hunter-gatherers; tight knit communities who depended upon each other for their very survival. There was no ownership of land, homes, crops or animals, every thing they did have was communally held and shared in a term Ryan & Jetha (2010), call “fierce egalitarianism” (p. 9), sharing was mandatory. Humans have been around in our current manifestation for roughly two hundred thousand years and the earliest evidence of agriculture is from approximately ten thousand years ago (Ryan & Jetha, 2010), or five percent of our existence. Put into a smaller -more understandable- scale, if *homo sapiens*’ entire existence fit into one hour, we spent 57 of those minutes living in community that we relied upon for all of our needs. We still need community - we’re hardwired for it. The last 3 minutes have not negated that need. There are certainly other reasons than our lack of community for the destruction we’ve done to the earth, but without community to both support us and hold us accountable for our actions, stopping the destruction is going to be a *lot* harder.

If we embrace the principles of voluntary simplicity, trusteeship, Gandhi’s *swadeshi*, participation, ownership and the development of small, local economies and communities, our communities will be sustainable by default as well as centers of justice for all the inhabitants of our one beautiful home, earth.

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## Appendix I

## 17 Rules for Sustainable Communities by Wendell Berry

1. Always ask of any proposed change or innovation: What will this do to our community?  
How will this affect our common wealth?
2. Always include local nature - the land, the water, the air, the native creatures - within the membership of the community.
3. Always ask how local needs might be supplied from local sources, including the mutual help of neighbors.
4. Always supply local needs first (and only then think of exporting products - first to nearby cities, then to others).
5. Understand the ultimate unsoundness of the industrial doctrine of 'labor saving' if that implies poor work, unemployment, or any kind of pollution or contamination.
6. Develop properly scaled value-adding industries for local products to ensure that the community does not become merely a colony of the national or global economy.
7. Develop small-scale industries and businesses to support the local farm and/or forest economy.
8. Strive to supply as much of the community's own energy as possible.
9. Strive to increase earnings (in whatever form) within the community for as long as possible before they are paid out.
10. Make sure that money paid into the local economy circulates within the community and decrease expenditures outside the community.

11. Make the community able to invest in itself by maintaining its properties, keeping itself clean (without dirtying some other place), caring for its old people, and teaching its children.
12. See that the old and young take care of one another. The young must learn from the old, not necessarily, and not always in school. There must be no institutionalized childcare and no homes for the aged. The community knows and remembers itself by the association of old and young.
13. Account for costs now conventionally hidden or externalized. Whenever possible, these must be debited against monetary income.
14. Looks into the possible uses of local currency, community-funded loan programs, systems of barter, and the like.
15. Always be aware of the economic value of neighborly acts. In our time, the costs of living are greatly increased by the loss of neighborhood, which leaves people to face their calamities alone.
16. A rural community should always be acquainted and inter connected with community-minded people in nearby towns and cities.
17. A sustainable rural economy will depend on urban consumers loyal to local products.  
  
Therefore, we are talking about an economy that will always be more cooperative than competitive.